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Teacher's research supports multiage combo classrooms

Last spring when Tracy Harding presented her research at the Dominican Scholarly and Creative Works Conference in Guzman Lecture Hall, she delved into the national debate about the benefits of multiage combination classrooms versus traditional classrooms in elementary and middle schools.

Her abstract – [“Effectiveness of Intentional Multi-Age Programs: Informing Public Schools about Combination Classes”](#) – was discovered and cited in a newspaper story in Virginia this fall.

“They used it for the power of good to show this is something that is positive,” Tracy says, smiling.

Tracy, who earned her teaching credential from Dominican last year, tackled the subject of multiage combination classrooms while at Cascade Canyon School where she was a fifth grade math teacher and also taught a multiage fifth/sixth grade social studies class. She first experienced multiage classrooms when she was placed for student teaching in two combo classrooms at Lynwood Elementary School.

“Cascade was the genesis of my research. I started seeing places where public schools could take elements of multiage education and have it be beneficial for students while still fulfilling the needs that public schools have,” says Tracy, who earned a Bachelor of Arts/Sociology degree from the University of Utah in 1998. “I saw growth with all the students at Cascade. I saw either academic growth or social growth and that to me is the biggest selling point.”

With the help and encouragement of Madalienne Peters, professor in the [School of Education and Counseling Psychology](#), Tracy honed her research on multiage combination classrooms. She had discussions with multiple teachers and focused on short-term solutions in public schools to examine best practices and professional development involved in creating an effective and intentional multiage program.

“An intentional program is one that really thinks about and looks at all the aspects and plans three steps ahead to make sure they don’t hand something to a teacher that’s going to be potentially a problem,” Tracy says. “All the benefits that researchers find are through social/emotional. They will tell you that – and having been a preschool teacher I can tell you this for sure – if the social/emotional isn’t taken care of you cannot learn if you don’t have the ability to regulate your emotions. If you do not have that strong foundation, it’s going to interfere with your academics. That’s one of the benefits of multiage.”

Tracy didn’t see that at first in her 13-year teaching career, but she does now after extensive research.

“The idea that you are with the same teacher for more than one year and you’re with the same students for more than one year you are forced to, like a family, work through the issues that you have,” Tracy says. “If you know you are with the same people for two years that changes the dynamic and that makes things a little more serious and focused.”

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